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ABSTRACT

This lesson plan introduces students to one of the most widely-read genres of 19th-century American literature and an important influence within the African American literary tradition today. The lesson focuses on the "Narrative of William W. Brown, An American Slave" (1847), which, along with the "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass" (1845), set the pattern for this genre and its combination of varied literary traditions and devices. To help students recognize the complex nature of the slave narrative, the lesson explores Brown's work from a variety of perspectives. Students first consider the narrative as a historical record, examining episodes that describe the conditions Brown lived through as a slave. Next, they examine it as a work of literature, investigating the rhetorical techniques Brown uses to shape his experiences into a story. Third, students consider the work's political dimension, weighing the arguments that Brown presents as an abolitionist spokesman and the degree to which his narrative should be treated as political rhetoric. Finally, students approach the narrative as an autobiography, a work of self-actualization in which Brown charts a spiritual as well as a literal journey to freedom. To conclude the lesson, students produce an essay explaining how Brown's narrative challenged the prejudices of white readers in his own time and how it challenges prejudices today. The lesson plan also contains the subject areas covered in the lesson, time required to complete the lesson, the skills used in the lesson, the grade level (9-12), and lists of the standards developed by professional or government associations that are related to the lesson, as well as activities to extend the lesson. (RS)

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Perspectives on the Slave Narrative

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SEARCH EDSITEMENT

Introduction

This lesson plan introduces students to one of the most widely-read genres of 19th-century American literature and an important influence within the African American literary tradition even today. The lesson focuses on the *Narrative of William W. Brown, An American Slave* (1847), which, along with the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), set the pattern for this genre and its combination of varied literary traditions and devices. To help students recognize the complex nature of the slave narrative, the lesson explores Brown's work from a variety of perspectives. Students first consider the narrative as a historical record, examining episodes that describe the conditions Brown lived through as a slave. Next, they examine it as a work of literature, investigating the rhetorical techniques Brown uses to shape his experiences into a story. Third, students consider the work's political dimension, weighing the arguments that Brown presents as an abolitionist spokesman and the degree to which his narrative should be treated as political rhetoric. Finally, students approach the narrative as an autobiography, a work of self-actualization in which Brown charts a spiritual as well as a literal journey to freedom. To conclude the lesson, students produce an essay explaining how Brown's narrative challenged the prejudices of white readers in his own time and how it challenges prejudices today.

Learning Objectives

(1) To learn about the slave narrative and its importance in the abolitionist movement; (2) To gain experience in working with the slave narrative as a resource for historical study; (3) To evaluate the slave narrative as a work of literature; (4) To examine the slave narrative in the context of political controversy as an argument for abolition; (5) To explore themes of self-actualization and spiritual freedom within the slave narrative.

Lesson Plan

NOTE: *Though considerably more temperate in its picture of slavery than many examples of the genre, the* Narrative of William W. Brown *contains language that, while inoffensive in his day, can be disturbing to modern readers, and portrays many scenes of shocking brutality. Educators should review this text before introducing it to students and may wish to consider presenting only excerpts in order to avoid these problematic aspects of Brown's story.*

1 Begin by providing students with some background on the slave narrative and its place in American literature, referring to the article, "An Introduction to the Slave Narrative," by William L. Andrews, which is available through EDSITEment at the Documenting The American South website.

Literature: American

Literature: Biography

History: U.S.: Civics and U.S. Government

History: U.S.: Civil Rights

History: World: Human Rights

9-12

Three to four class periods

historical comprehension
historical interpretation
historical research
information gathering
reading literary texts
critical analysis
literary interpretation
critical thinking
working with primary documents
Internet skills

NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; (more)
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. (more)
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. (more)
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual

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Documenting the American South website.

- Explain that slave narratives were widely-read in the decades before the Civil War and instrumental in building support among white Americans for the abolition of slavery. Although at one time discredited as sensationalistic in their portrayal of slavery, slave narratives have been recognized since the 1970s as an invaluable source of firsthand information about the experience of African Americans in slavery and the community they forged for themselves amid relentless oppression.
- In addition, slave narratives have been increasingly studied as a formative part of the African American literary tradition, lending a distinct voice to our national myth of the individual's quest for freedom and self-fulfillment, which echoes in 20th century classics like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and in the work of novelists like Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, and Ernest J. Gaines. For additional background students might consult *The Slave's Narrative*, edited by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

2 The *Narrative of the Life of William W. Brown, An American Slave*, first published in 1847, only two years after the pioneering *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, offers perhaps the most accessible example of the slave narrative genre for modern readers and is available through EDSITEment at the **Documenting the American South** website. (At the website's homepage, click on "North American Slave Narratives," then click "Collection of Electronic Texts." Scroll down to "Brown, William Wells" and select "Narrative of the Life of William B. Brown," then click on "HTML file" to retrieve an online edition of the text.)

- Introduce students to Brown's narrative by providing a brief profile of his career, referring to the "About William Wells Brown" page of the **Documenting the American South** website. (At the website's homepage, click on "North American Slave Narratives," then click "Collection of Electronic Texts." Scroll down to "Brown, William Wells" and select "Narrative of the Life of William B. Brown," then click on "About William Wells Brown" to retrieve this document.)
- Students should know that following the period described in his narrative, Brown became a celebrated lecturer in the anti-slavery movement both in the United States and in Great Britain, where he lived from 1849 to 1854, in part to avoid re-enslavement under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. While in England, Brown wrote *Clotel*, one of the first novels published by an African American, and following his return to the United States he went on to become a leading black American literary figure of the mid-19th century, acclaimed as a poet, novelist, playwright, and historian of African American culture.

3 As students read the *Narrative of the Life of William W. Brown,* have them consider it first as an eyewitness report on the historic realities of slavery.

- What incidents does Brown offer as characteristic of the slave's life? How does he describe the slave's duties? What does he tell us about the slave's family and circle of friends?
- Much of Brown's narrative portrays the harsh treatment of slaves by their masters. Have students find incidents in

language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (more)
5. Students emplo, a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiencees for a variety of purposes. (more)
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (more)
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. (more)
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (more)
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles. (more)

National Council for the Social Studies

1. Culture (more)
2. Time, Continuity, and Change (more)
4. Individual Development and Identity (more)
5. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions (more)
6. Power, Authority, and Governance (more)
10. Civic Ideals and Practices (more)

National Standards for Civics and Government

5. What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy? (more)

View your state's standards

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which the relationship between slave and slaveholder is more complex, revealing an element of understanding on both sides. How do these glimpses of relationships between slave and master reflect on those episodes which exhibit the slaveholder's cruelty?

- Have students focus also on evidence of resistance to slavery in Brown's narrative. Call attention to the story of the slave Randall that closes Brown's first chapter (pages 16-19 in the electronic text), and to episodes in which Brown himself offers resistance, such as his snowball battle with a group of white boys (Chapter 3, page 28) and his repeated attempts to escape (Chapter 2, page 21; Chapter 7, pages 65-68; and Chapter 10, pages 89-93). How do these incidents add to our understanding of slave life?
- Have students summarize the information Brown provides about slavery by producing a chart on which they list in one column facts they already knew and in another column facts they found surprising. Compare charts in a class discussion. What other sorts of documentary materials would students seek out to gain a complete picture of slave life?

4 Have students next consider Brown's narrative as a work of literature, a story in which he uses literary devices to shape his material and achieve specific effects. For students, the clearest evidence of Brown's literary intentions may be the passages of verse that he includes in his narrative, most often to mark a moment of intense emotion. Help students analyze how Brown creates the most famous of these moments in his story, the episode in which he is separated forever from his mother (Chapter 9, pages 77-79).

- Note, for example, how he prepares for the scene, building suspense by shifting from his matter-of-fact style into a more melodramatic manner:

  > *The boat was not quite ready to commence running, and therefore I had to remain with Mr. Willi. But during this time, I had to undergo a trial for which I was entirely unprepared. My mother, who had been in jail since her return until the present time, was now about being carried to New Orleans, to die on a cotton, sugar, or rice plantation!*

- Have students comment on some other aspects of Brown's artistry in presenting this scene: for example, the conventional phrases that trigger an emotional response ("too deep for tears," "fell upon my knees," "I thought myself to blame"); the religious sentiments that elevate his mother's parting words; the impending approach of the slaveholder Mansfield which heightens the suspense; the desperate urgency of his mother's plea that he seek his own freedom; her final words, which he hears after the slaveholder has driven him away and which he describes as a "shriek," suggesting the voice of a soul being carried to its doom.
- How do these literary touches reflect on Brown's claim that his story is true? Explore the idea that, while events may be dramatized, the emotions they express -- and evoke in a reader -- can be authentic.
- Have students cite other passages in Brown's narrative that reveal his artistry, and have them evaluate his skill in characterization (e.g., his portrayal of the slave trader Walker) and plotting (e.g., his shift from an episodic to a

more continuous narrative style as his story approaches its goal). Students may notice that Brown devotes little attention to description: what does his mother look like? what does St. Louis look like? Have them choose a character or setting from the narrative and describe it from Brown's point of view, emulating his literary style.

5 Remind students that Brown wrote his narrative in connection with his employment by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society as a spokesman for abolitionism. How does his story, and the way in which he presents it, serve that cause?

- Which episodes, for example, seem calculated to shock a white reader into an abhorrence of slavery? Look back at Brown's opening chapters. What is the first impression of slavery and slaveholders that he provides here? How does his emphasis on physical abuse support the abolitionist cause?
- Look also at Brown's portrayal of slaveholders, in particular his comments on their piety. What does he say about his master's sudden enthusiasm for prayer and church-going (Chapter 4, pages 36-38)? About the family prayers of those who captured him on his first attempt at freedom (Chapter 8, page 71)? About the auctioneer's cry that a slave "has got religion" (Chapter 9, pages 82-83)? How would these moral attacks help persuade a white reader to oppose slavery?
- Have students summarize Brown's arguments for the abolition of slavery in an outline. Then discuss whether, as an earlier generation of scholars believed, Brown's political agenda renders his narrative unreliable as a historical document.

6 Conclude this lesson by asking students to consider Brown's narrative as an autobiography in which he charts a quest not only for freedom but also for self-identity.

- How does Brown's character develop through the events of his narrative? Have students compare their impression of him in these episodes: when he is treed by a pack of bloodhounds after his first escape attempt (Chapter 2, pages 21-22); when he dupes a free black man into taking a whipping intended for him (Chapter 5, pages 52-57); when he objects to his master's plan to sell him and takes the opportunity to make a second escape attempt (Chapter 7, pages 62-64); when he parries the efforts of his last master's wife to have him marry and turns her plan to his advantage in plotting his final escape (Chapter 9, pages 84-86, and Chapter 10, pages 89-90). In what respect does Brown evolve from a passive observer into an active protagonist through episodes like these?
- A turning-point in this narrative development, and a key element in the evolution of Brown's character, comes in Chapter 11 (pages 96-98) as he travels toward freedom and asks himself, "What should be my name?" Have students explain the significance Brown sees in his choice of a name. How does this choice affect his sense of self-identity? What does his decision to reclaim the name "William" and reject the name "Sanford" indicate about his growing sense of independence?
- Soon after this decision, Brown meets the man who finally secures his freedom by helping him along his way and by

completing his name. "Since thee has got out of slavery," this old Quaker tells him, "thee has become a man, and men always have two names" (page 103). How does Brown's addition of this man's name to his own complete his sense of self-identity? Is it significant that he names himself after a white man? Is it significant that instead of just two names he takes three?

- Brown ends his narrative with the story of an attempt to kidnap a fugitive slave family living in Canada that was foiled by a courageous band of African Americans living in Buffalo, who rode to their rescue (pages 109-124). What does this final episode add to our sense of Brown's character? Does he acquire the stature of hero by taking part in this "fight for human freedom"? And what does this episode add to Brown's argument for the abolition of slavery?
- Remind students that one purpose of the slave narrative was to dispel the prejudiced belief that African Americans are not equal to whites in intellect or ability, not fully deserving of freedom and human rights. How did Brown's narrative, which combines artistry, argument, authenticity, and the autobiography of a self-created individual, challenge the prejudices of its white readers? Have students explore this question in an essay.

Extending the Lesson

- There are many other slave narratives available through EDSITEment at the **Documenting the American South** website, including narratives written by ex-slaves in the years following the Civil War. Students might read Booker T. Washington's famous *Up From Slavery* to see how the slave narrative genre changes when the immediate political pressures that helped shape Brown's work are removed. (At the **Documenting the American South** website homepage, click on "North American Slave Narratives," then click "Collection of Electronic Texts." Scroll down to "Washington, Booker T." and select "Up From Slavery.")
- Students might also compare Brown's written narrative to some of the oral narratives of slave times collected by Work Progress Administration archivists during the Great Depression, many of which are accessible through EDSITEment in the "American Life Histories" collection at the **American Memory Project** website. (At the website's homepage, click "Browse," then scroll down and click "Life Histories" to enter the collection. Click "Search by Keywords" and type the word "slave" into the search engine to retrieve a list of relevant oral histories.)
- Further documentary material on slavery is available through EDSITEment at the following websites: **Documents of African-American Women**, **Freedmen and Southern Society Project**, and **The Valley of the Shadow**.